

Theophrastus and the slaves of Athens

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Slavery was a fundamental part of the economic landscape of the ancient world. Here David Lewis shows us how Classical Athens depended on slaves from Balkan and eastern Mediterranean regions that today are once again associated with human trafficking.

Theophrastus came from Eresus on Lesbos; but he spent a significant portion of his life in Athens, and towards the end of the fourth century B.C. he succeeded Aristotle as head of the Peripatetic philosophical school. Of his extensive intellectual output – over two hundred books – not much survives; but by lucky chance we possess a copy of his will, preserved in a much later work by Diogenes Laertius, a writer of the third century A.D. In his will Theophrastus distributes his property among his heirs. Besides his books, landed property, and other items are some ‘articles of human property’ (as Theophrastus’ teacher Aristotle liked to style them), slaves:

And of my slaves I at once manumit Molon and Timon and Parmeno; I manumit Manes and Callias on condition that they stay four years in the garden and work there together and that their conduct is free from blame. Of my household furniture let so much as the executors think right be given to Pompylus and let the rest be sold. I also devise Carion to Demotimus, and Donax to Neleus. But sell Euboeus.

(trans. Hicks, adapted)

Such a document underscores in many ways how much slavery constituted an everyday concern of the propertied classes at Athens in the early third century B.C. In a few strokes of a pen, Theophrastus changes the life trajectory of Euboeus: three words, in fact (‘but sell Euboeus’), and this slave must have had to say goodbye to the other slaves of Theophrastus’ household and prepare for an uncertain future as the property of an unknown master. Carion and Donax were destined to leave Theophrastus’ household too, as slaves of new masters. Molon, Timon, Parmeno, and (if we suppose that their conduct was indeed free from blame)

Manes and Callias, on the other hand, were at least disburdened of the problem of having an owner at all, and were free to strike out on their own.

These few lines of text are eloquent testimony to how law could profoundly influence the course of slaves’ lives, for as Theophrastus’ private property, their fates were to a large degree in his hands. Indeed, Theophrastus interrupts deciding the fate of his slaves to add a few instructions about what is to be done with his furniture. This marks a key difference between ‘modern slavery’ and Athenian slavery: the former is clandestine and lacks an institutional and legal framework. In Athens, slavery was part and parcel of the formal legal order of the city.

Athens: a slave society

Scratch the surface of Athenian society, and you will find similar stories. You might walk around the Acropolis today and admire the Erechtheum; we know from inscribed accounts the names of the slaves who, working alongside their masters, built this temple. Or consider the fate of the alleged Herm-vandals (including the notorious Alcibiades) on the eve of the Sicilian Expedition in 415 B.C., whose shenanigans are described by Thucydides: the property of these men was confiscated and auctioned off by the state; and we know from inscriptions the names of over forty slaves belonging to them who were confiscated and sold. And so on.

Classical Athens was a remarkable slave society. Its richest citizens might have owned fifty or more slaves; and one rich metic (resident foreigner), the Syracusan Cephalus, in whose house in the Piraeus the debate at the beginning of Plato’s *Republic* is set, owned an exceptionally large number, a hundred and twenty. The average Athenian citizen was a slave-owner; only the poorest were not. Cephalus’ son Lysias wrote a speech for a

poor citizen in support of his plea to stay on the corn-dole; and in his speech the man claims to have been so poor that he could not afford to buy a slave to replace him in his shop.

All told, slaves constituted at least a third of the population of Attica in the fourth century B.C. Classical historians are, for the most part, not sufficiently aware of how remarkable this fact is. The slave population of Roman Italy, according to the best recent estimates, constituted perhaps 15–25% of its population at its peak. In 1860, slaves made up just 12.8% of the US population. In terms of absolute numbers, Athenian slavery may have been on a smaller scale than Roman or American slavery; but slave ownership was far more widespread and pervasive in Athens than in these other famous slave societies. Why?

The economics of the slave trade

The answer lies in the slave trade. Prices of slaves in Athens are known from the aforementioned confiscation inscriptions, and a number of attestations in fourth-century oratory. If the sample is small, it is at least consistent, and shows that on average a slave could be purchased for rather less than a year’s wages (based on the level of wages paid to craftsmen working on state-funded projects). This is a remarkable fact. As Mark Golden has put it:

In terms of their cost, their distribution, and their pervasive effect on society as a whole, they were rather like our own necessary luxury, the automobile.

The evidence of slave prices, moreover, dovetails with the impression that can be gleaned from the literary sources: most Athenian households could afford at least one slave.

Since demand for slaves was evidently high, the supply of slaves must have been regular and high-volume to keep prices so low. A further factor lies in transport costs, for the Athenians imported slaves from their close neighbours, above all Anatolia (Modern Turkey) to the east, and Thrace (roughly the northern part of Modern

Greece; and Bulgaria) to the north; the resultant short supply chains helped to stop costs spiralling. Two of Theophrastus' slaves, indeed, bear names that may hint at such origins: Manes was a name typical of Phrygia (now central Turkey); and Athenian masters might name their newly bought Phrygian slave 'Manes' as a xenophobic nickname (not much different from nicknaming an Irishman 'Paddy'). Carion is an ethnic nickname for slaves from Caria, south-western Turkey. Theophrastus' other slaves may well have been foreign too, for many foreign slaves were given Greek names.

Slavery and the 'golden age' of Greece

The economic history of the Aegean slave trade is of great interest, for in recent years scholars have become increasingly aware of how the 'Greek miracle', that is, the flowering of classical Greek culture (philosophy; drama; art and literature), rested on a firm economic foundation. Trade between the city-states flowed at a remarkably high volume, comparable to that of the city-states of Renaissance Italy two millennia later. The economy grew over time, and most Greek citizens became fairly comfortably off (at least in comparative-historical terms) by the classical era. Their skeletons show them to be on average fairly tall; and isotopic analysis of their bones shows the classical Athenians to have enjoyed a relatively protein-rich diet (especially from meat from public sacrifices, as well as seafood) that is quite unusual for pre-industrial populations. Books and articles are continually emerging that flesh out in ever more detail this picture of ancient Greek economic success.

The flipside of the coin lies in the human cost of slavery: that was borne not only by the slaves themselves, but by the broader regions from which these slaves came. David Braund was surely right when he recently wrote that:

there seems every reason to suppose that the slave trade at the coast served to generate instability and conflict in the interior.

For whereas Greek states such as Athens forbade the enslavement of free persons within the boundaries of their territory, the same was not true of these peripheral regions: elites in these regions knew the value of slaves to their Greek neighbours, and Greek demand incentivized these elites to predate on their own populations.

Xenophon provides a neat vignette of how this might play out in practice. He describes how a Thracian warlord named Seuthes raided and burned an enemy (Thracian) town, enslaved a thousand people, and sent them to the nearby Greek

port of Perinthus to be sold on into the markets of the Greek city states. Greek market demand thus accelerated and intensified processes of violence and predation in regions such as Thrace; and it made local elites rich into the bargain.

One of the most archaeologically visible legacies of this process lies in the trade in wine. The Greek historian Polybius, writing in the Hellenistic period, noted how the peoples of the Black Sea region imported Greek wine and exported in return slaves and hides. The south-western coast of the Black Sea, abutting the Thracian hinterland, is riddled with finds of Thasian wine amphorae from the Hellenistic period. 'In other words', writes Braund, 'the wine trade in the region reflects the trade in slaves.' Likewise, in Anatolia, excavations of the Phrygian towns of Gordion and Dascylium have uncovered evidence for regular imports of Chian wine amphorae over a period of several centuries.

Into the Circles: the lives of slaves

What of the Thracians and Anatolians who were torn from their own communities, enslaved, and cast into this network of commerce? Little is known of their lives first hand, though occasionally Greek writers did discuss these topics. We know for instance of a periodic auction of slaves in Athens, probably held on the first of each month, in a section of the agora known as 'the Circles'.

The Circles must have been the destination for many thousands of Thracian and Phrygian slaves during the classical period. In a fragment of one of Aristophanes' lost plays a slave cries

'what an ill-starred day it was then, when the auctioneer called "this man's price?" for me!'

In another, later fragment, Menander (a contemporary of Theophrastus) has a character worry about being sold:

'I already see myself, I swear by the gods, stripped naked in the Circles, hurried about the circle and sold!'

Such snippets of information convey something of the bustle and terror of Athenian slave auctions, with their host of prospective buyers arrayed in a circle around the auction-block and, shouting over the tumult, an auctioneer.

Many if not most of the slaves being sold in this way cannot have fully comprehended what was going on because they probably understood very little Greek. They would have had to learn it quickly, though; and Demosthenes hints at this rough baptism in the Greek language when he criticizes Aeschines in his speech *On the False Embassy* for not speaking up on a certain topic, though the words Aeschines could have used were simple

enough to be known to a slave bought the day before.

One remarkable text, though, does preserve the words of a real slave at Athens: a small letter written on a scrap of lead, dating to the fourth century B.C., unearthed in the agora by archaeologists. It is a letter from a slave to his mother and a man named Xenocles, asking them to intercede with his owners and have him removed from the foundry where he was being abused:

Lesis is sending [a letter] to Xenocles and his mother [asking] that they by no means overlook that he is perishing in the foundry but that they come to his masters and that they have something better found for him. For I have been handed over to a thoroughly wicked man; I am perishing from being whipped; I am tied up; I am treated like dirt – more and more!
(trans. Harris)

This letter provides a rare opportunity to look at Athenian society from a slave's perspective; and it shows a very different picture from the rarefied air of the Lyceum in Theophrastus' day. Beatings and abuse of slaves in grubby, sooty locations like foundries are just as much part of Athenian history as the debates of philosophers that have traditionally captured the lion's share of attention; and documents like these remind us that the leisure that facilitated the achievements of classical philosophers – people like Theophrastus and his peers – was often built on the back of slave labour, oftentimes brutally coerced.

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